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The art of medicine

Hearing medieval voices

Hearing voices without external stimuli: in the popular imagination, auditory hallucination is most often understood as a symptom of severe mental disorders. Yet voice-hearing is also an important aspect of lived experience, not always satisfactorily addressed by medical diagnosis and treatment. Looking across cultures and historical eras suggests a wide range of possible kinds of voice-hearing experience. The medieval period is of special interest because its thought world takes for granted the possibility of the supernatural, while its theories of medicine and psychology offer powerful explanatory models for hallucinatory experience. Some of the greatest religious writing in the period is inspired by hearing voices, while its fictions also play creatively with voice-hearing.

In the pre-Cartesian world view of the Middle Ages, ideas about body and mind were closely connected. Hippocrates' theory of the four humours, developed by Galen in the second century, underpinned the notion of a mind-body continuum: humours shaped both mind and body, and their balance was essential to physical and mental health. In striking resonance with contemporary neuroscientific theories, emotions were written on the body but also had a fundamental role in cognition. Sense impressions were understood to be put together by the inner senses, situated in the brain. The celebrated 13th-century theologian and philosopher Thomas Aquinas described thoughts as dependent on such "forms" or sense impressions, which passed through imagination and cognition and were stored in the memory. This model endorses the idea of an inner eye and ear—making real the possibility of visionary experience and hearing inner voices. Medieval ideas were coloured too by a profound awareness of a multifaceted supernatural—not only God and the devil, but a spirit world just beyond human reach, of angels, demons, and ghosts.

The affective experience that produces voices and visions in medieval writing is repeatedly that of love, whether romantic or divine. Love is conceived in medical treatises and in romances as a mental and bodily illness, caused by supernatural, invasive forces: an arrow shot by the god or goddess of love results in symptoms that only the beloved can cure. Geoffrey Chaucer, writing in the late 14th century, depicts the physiology of love with precise detail. In his *Knight's Tale*, the lover Arcite, struck in the heart by love, is transformed both physically, becoming pale, cold and hollow-eyed, and mentally, so that his "cell fantastic", his imagination, obsessively brings forth images of his lady; the effect is described as "mania". Chaucer's early poem *The Book of the Duchess* depicts a dream-vision, a form of voice-hearing triggered in the narrator by the story he reads and his own mysterious illness. The narrator encounters in his dream a melancholy man in black, perhaps an alter ego, with whom he converses, and who we eventually find is mourning the death of his beautiful young wife. Chaucer gives an account of the man's all-consuming inner dialogue, as he silently "argued with his own thought". He is lost in his "sorrowful imagination" which, like Arcite's, eventually recreates through the images stored in memory a multisensory image of his lost duchess—her

movement, voice, and touch. These 14th-century narratives can illuminate, and are illuminated by, contemporary theories of trauma and dissociation, as well as by theories of inner speech disturbance, which have been proposed as a partial explanation for voice-hearing.

In his epic romance *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer develops this idea further. Troilus, the archetypal betrayed lover, is literally unmade by love, his illness so extreme that he wastes away to a type of melancholy—emaciated, swooning, withdrawn, suffering from nightmares. His memory repeatedly circles back to images but also to the voice of his beloved, whose melodious singing he seems to hear “in his soul”. His memory functions as a “book” containing the “process” of their love, which he replays again and again, “refiguring” his lady’s shape, words, and deeds—and hearing in his mind the words of others, whispering among themselves of his transformed, melancholy state. Although we typically think of memory as working through visual images, for the medieval writer these can as readily be sounds. Such sounds are heard by the inner ear, recreated by the memory, but in a way that is intrusive and all-consuming. These works convey an impression not of wilful construction of internal voices, but of voices that are bodied forth in the mind as a result of extreme emotion, dissociation, and trauma. Such medieval ideas about voices go far beyond the simple notion of auditory verbal hallucinations as symptoms of psychosis, to explore how the body and brain might respond to acute emotional strain.

The religious writing of the late Middle Ages offers a different perspective on voice-hearing through its profoundly personal and vivid accounts of visionary experience. Mysticism emphasised the affective power of sensory experience—whether this was mortification of the body or rapt contemplation of images—to move the individual to spiritual understanding and vision. Such sensory, visionary experience was crucial to the thought of the celebrated 11th-century saint, abbess, and theologian, Hildegard of Bingen; it is not coincidental that she was also a composer and poet. For women, who in the later Middle Ages were less likely to have access to Latin traditions of learning, affective piety held a particular appeal, and produced a remarkable range of female-authored texts—including, in England, the writings of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe.

Julian of Norwich chose the life of an anchorite, living in a small cell on the side of a church, but also prayed to be brought near to death in order to live more devoutly. During her extreme illness in 1373, at the age of about 30 years, she experienced her visions or “showings”, which she recounted as *Revelations of Divine Love*, extending an early short narrative into a complex theological exploration after years of contemplation. Many of Julian’s visionary experiences are multisensory, sometimes seen with the “bodily eye”, as when the Crucifix before her bleeds, sometimes with the “inner eye”, but they are also characterised by direct experience of the divine voice. Julian’s account is strikingly direct, “I looked thereupon with the eye of my understanding and thought: ‘What may this be?’ And it was generally answered thus: ‘It is all that is made’”. She is explicit about hearing the voice within her mind, “To my mind came the answer”, and she distinguishes this from her own reasoning and thoughts.

Julian also conveys a keen sense of a phenomenon frequently described by voice-hearers, of a non-speaking voice, which she experiences, she says, “in my soul”. In a later vision, she smells the terrifying stench of brimstone and hears two people chattering earnestly, yet inaudible and incomprehensible, intended, she writes, “to stir me to despair”. The description resembles contemporary descriptions of the intrusive, frightening, and sometimes plural experience of auditory hallucinations. Vision is distinguished from understanding: only 20 years later can Julian fully comprehend her experience, its meaning drawn together in the words immortalised by T S Eliot in *Four Quartets*, “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well”.

The power of the inner eye and ear are acutely evident in the spiritual autobiography of Julian’s near-contemporary, Margery Kempe (1436–38). Their lives were in many ways dramatically opposed: Margery was intensely engaged in the world, a married woman who bore 14 children, ran a brewing business, and travelled on pilgrimage across Europe and to the Holy Land. Margery’s visionary experiences are multimodal and vividly physical: the first is the sound of melodious music “so sweet and delectable that she thought she had been in paradise”. Experiencing suicidal despair after the birth of her first child, she is cured by a vision of Jesus “in likeness of a man, most seemly, most beauteous, and most amiable”, taking her as a lover. She can also be terrified by demonic visions—often in the form of grotesque sexual visions. Yet the book is most of all shaped by Margery’s conversations with God, often described as visitations while she is praying or contemplating. Subtle distinctions are made between external and internal voices: she hears God calling her aloud, “Margery”, but Jesus answers “in her soul” and her conversations with God open onto all-consuming visionary experience where she participates in Jesus’s life and Passion.[cut here] Margery’s visionary life was marked too by her loud and compulsive “cryings”—the physical mark of her divine inspiration. Echoing through the book, they can seem the voice of vision, reflecting the ineffability of the divine. As for Julian, though in very different ways, the conventions of mystical writing offered Margery a means to articulate existential questions and to place, if not fully to comprehend, extreme experience.

Medieval writing, then, offers sophisticated understandings of voices and visions. [cut here ok?]The all-consuming nature of profound affective experience may be destructive but also creative. Not all readers now share faith in the divine, nor in cosmic forces that strike the heart, but they can certainly relate to the powers of inspiration, suffering and imagination to body forth visions—beautiful or terrible—that speak down the centuries. In this very different medieval thought world that has so much to teach us, voice-hearing is explicable, validated, even longed-for.

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I am a Co-Investigator, Hearing the Voice project.